



Japanese Internment Camps

Presented by the Hampton Roads Naval Museum

Internment defined: Putting a person in prison or another kind of detention center by the government for military or political reasons

Internment Begins

The internment of Japanese Americans began immediately in the aftermath of the December 7th, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. Within hours of the attack, the FBI rounded up nearly 1,300 Japanese Americans and began sending them to military facilities in New Mexico, Arizona, Montana, North Dakota, and California.



President Franklin D. Roosevelt, then in his 11th year as President, issued [Executive Order 9066](#) on February 19th, 1942. With this Executive Order, the internment of Japanese Americans was officially underway.

120,000 Americans Held Prisoner

By the end of the war, over 120,000 Japanese Americans were interned at 10 different camps. Japanese Americans who were not brought to internment camps had to carry with them a travel permit called an "Alien Enemy Permit to Travel."

In addition to the construction of internment camps, Executive Order 9066 also created the Pacific Coast Exclusion Area. Much of the west coast was designated as a military zone, giving officials the power to exclude people because of their race. This zone became known as the **Pacific Coast Exclusion Area** (see map).



Creating an enemy and seizing property

Japanese Americans had established businesses throughout the West Coast, especially in California. When the internment began, the federal government gave these business owners no protections. The image to the right shows a Japanese American-owned shop selling all of its goods before the owners were sent to the internment camps. Despite their best efforts to integrate into American society, it did not take long for the U.S. media to portray Japanese Americans as enemies. Below is a political cartoon by Dr. Seuss depicting Japanese Americans on the West Coast as standing by, ready to sabotage the United States in support of the Japanese war effort.



Life in Internment

Life in the internment camps was harsh. Temperatures in the camps in southern California and Arizona regularly reached over 100 degrees. Even the United States Secretary of the Interior recognized that the conditions in the internment camps were borderline inhumane. He explained to President Roosevelt that, "The situation in at least some of the Japanese internment camps is bad and is becoming rapidly worse." A few camps tried to provide some social services like public schooling for children, but they lacked sustained funding and were never able to provide children with a full education ([click to read an interview with a survivor of internment who speaks of her time as a child in Rohwer](#)). Most camps did not have such services. Many lacked plumbing and kitchen facilities entirely.



Getting by through art

It was not easy for these Americans to adjust to living within such harsh conditions. Many turned to art to stay connected to their Japanese ancestry while holding themselves together. Artists did embroidery, painting, drawing, and carving, along with almost every other form of art to help stay focused during their time in the internment camps. Others found solidarity in writing poetry.



"My Plea"

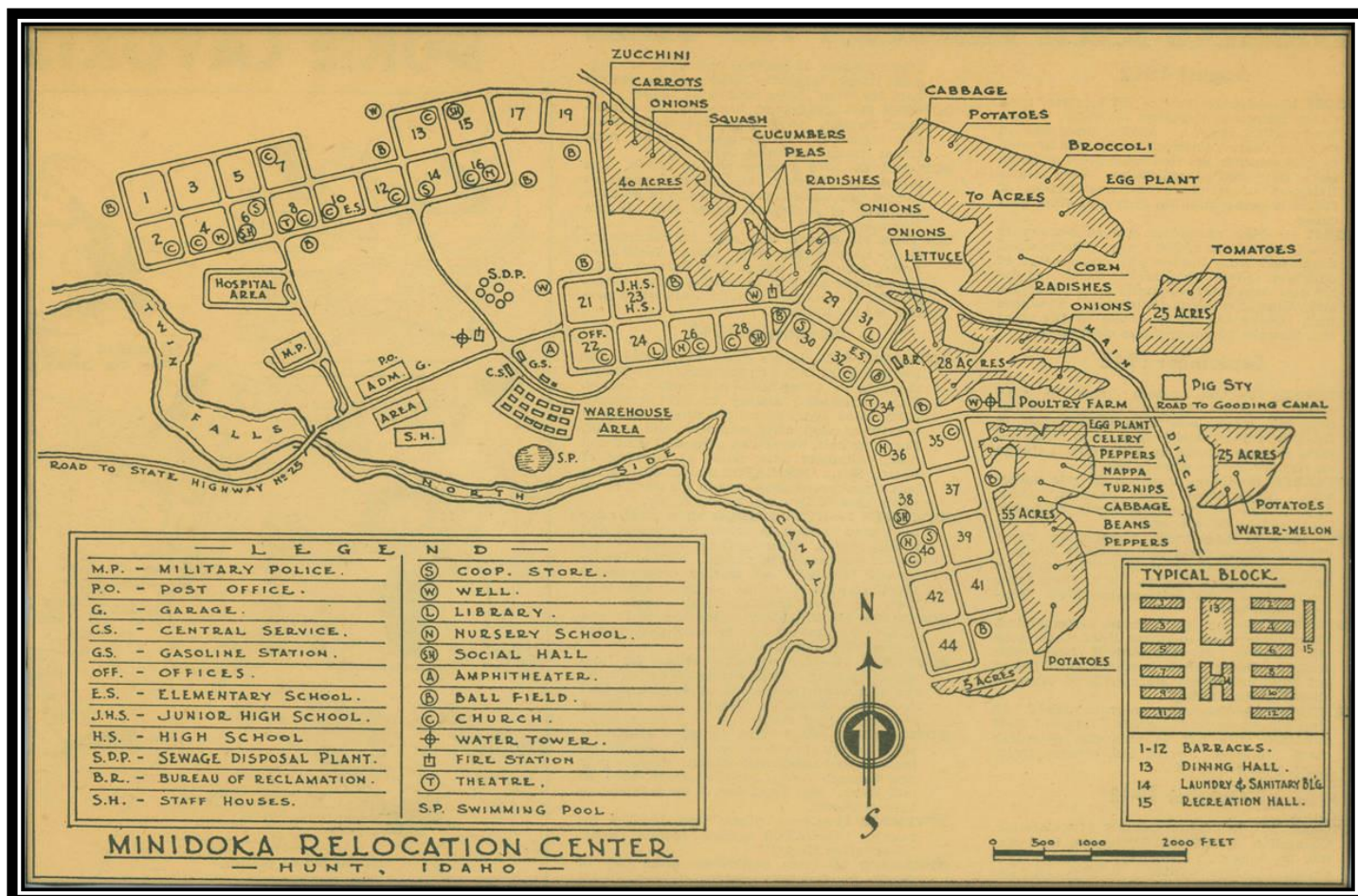
By Mary Matsuzawa

Oh, God, I pray that I may bear a cross
To set my people free,
That I may help to take good-will across
An understanding sea.

Oh, God, I pray that someday every race
May stand on equal plane
And prejudice will find no dwelling place
In a peace that all may gain.



Children wore tags to indicate who they were, so those organizing their internment were able to keep track of them.



An apology – 40 years later...

In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan signed into law the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which officially apologized for the injustices committed by the United States against Japanese Americans during World War II. Reparation payments of \$20,000 (roughly \$44,000 in 2020) were made to any individual still alive who was interned at any of the camps. 82,219 Japanese Americans received these payments.

New York Times

THURSDAY, AUGUST 11, 1988



President Reagan shaking hands with June Masuda Goto, whose sister was mentioned in Mr. Reagan's speech, before signing bill to compensate Japanese-

Americans interned in World War II. From right were Representative Patricia Saiki and Senators Ted Stevens and Daniel K. Inouye.

